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# Social Analysis for the 21st Century: How Faith Becomes Action

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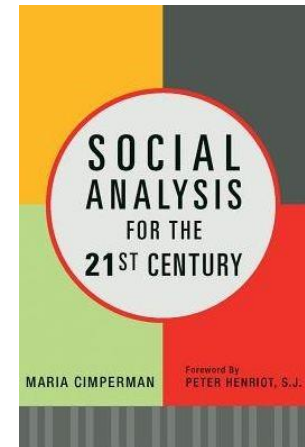
## Book Review

### Social Analysis for the 21st Century: How Faith Becomes Action

Maria Cimperman, Maryknoll

New York: Orbis Books, 2015.

In the mid-1980s I discovered a little green book by Joe Holland and Peter Henriot called *Social Analysis Linking Faith and Justice*. In my thirty years of teaching it was probably the book I most referred to students. It provided a necessary contextual framework for doing personal and social ethics. Henriot and Holland wrote at the time, "... Western civilization has entered into a profound and irreversible crisis." (Henriot and Holland, p. xii) Social Analysis was a means to unpacking and understanding the nature of the crisis, the ensuing justice questions that were raised, the important the role religion plays and how to connect all these realities to the pursuit of justice by Christians, churches and religious organizations. It is interesting that Peter Henriot in the *Forward* to Maria Cimperman's volume once again reminds us that if we are to move beyond charity today, as they hoped to in the 1980s, we need "...a tool of study, a method of investigation that probed deeper than mere stories. It required social analysis." (Cimperman, p. viii) There does seem to be a shallowness to the way some people today approach ethical questions. Social analysis presses the ethical exercise to a deeper level.



Cimperman's engaging volume re-energizes the concept of "social analysis." This is a wonderful volume that will no doubt help students, activists and leaders engage more meaningfully and effectively their work for peace and justice. Her volume takes serious the current context for doing ethics and engaging in social change. She begins with a description of the changes taking place, most notably globalization, and how they impact our world. She continues with an extensive summative chapter that pulls together the Hebrew and Christian scriptures and their implications for how people of faith might understand "Transformation." Taken together, the first two chapters provide a great introduction for people not familiar with the scriptures and the theology. For the well initiated, they offer a great review of the basic understandings necessary for doing Christian ethics in a serious way. This kind of theological and biblical background was not in Henriot and Holland volume in the same way. It is definitely helpful here.

In chapter three Cimperman offers a way to "get started" on doing analysis. She lays out her method for doing social analysis in a cogent and precise manner. She follows much of the same tradition as Henriot and Holland in this regard, describing the "historical and structural" relationships", laying out some guidelines for researching the issue, and then

explaining the various forms of analysis – sociological, economic, political, cultural, environmental and religious– which contribute to the overall process of social analysis. Cimperman builds on Henriot and Holland’s responses to “industrialism.” However, our world has moved on since the 1980s when “globalization” was in its infancy. Cimperman goes further in bringing in a new range of issues into the process; ecology, inequality, information technology, terrorism and migration. She develops all these with a feminist lens, which makes for a much richer treatment and a more accurate assessment of the current “crisis” in which we find ourselves.

Cimperman continues with her next chapter on “Faith Reflection.” This is actually quite a good chapter. It focuses on the various elements that inform this process whereby “... our deepest religious values ...are brought to the analysis and experience of the current situation to help determine the action to come.” “Openness,” “dependence on God,” “radical availability,” “deepest values,” “role ownership,” “communal discernment,” “gazing,” “religious (moral) imagination,” “insight” and “commitment to action” are the necessary elements Cimperman argues that contribute to a meaningful faith reflection. These are excellent and very helpful categories by which to measure any “faith reflection.” Among practitioners, social analyses can falter on this integrative aspect of the biblical and theological streams. I would have appreciated some further connections to the material in “Chapter 2 Transformation: Our Call to Love and Serve” where Cimperman details the basis for Christian discipleship.

I liked “Chapter 6 Action: Service in Solidarity” for its’ helpful realism about what is achievable. It offers some very specific and concrete directions. There is some wise pastoral counsel here on the expectations one can have about appropriate action and what action can achieve. The chapter also identifies some of the forces that can inhibit the actions and changes being pursued. These include such things as underestimating the “pervasive roots of injustice,” or the single-mindedness that does not allow for questioning even our own strategies, or the ensuing contrarian “voices” of “judgment,” “cynicism” and “fear.”

Cimperman has a whole chapter on what has come to be called “adaptive and creative leadership.” Ron Heifetz has done considerable work in this field of “adaptive leadership” for people in business, government and the not-for-profit sector. Adaptive leadership is also helpful to ethical deliberation. This is a great addition to the discussion of social analysis. Cimperman offers very useful and practical ideas for those in positions formal and informal leadership to do ethics appropriately and responsibly in the midst of imperfect circumstances. This volume is one that should be on the shelf of every community leader. It deserves revisiting as one finds oneself immersed again in a new issue or ongoing cause. It provides some important coordinates for how leaders need to understand this task of social analysis as a responsibility of leadership.

I would offer two critiques of this volume. The first may seem a bit trivial. The book is steeped in Roman Catholic social teaching. The idea of social analysis originated in large measure among liberation theologians and social activists. Having worked most of my

professional life in the ecumenical and multifaith world, I know there are many similar illustrations and statements in other churches and faith traditions. Some modest genuflection toward ecumenical and multifaith partners would make the book feel a bit more inclusive. Even more importantly, it might underscore the need for building common collaborative solidarity in doing social analysis together to address issues of justice and peace. In a world where religious communities are often blamed for all the division and violence in the world, I think this would be an important contribution to ecumenical and multifaith understanding and action.

My second critique is the omission of a section on “Social Change.” Henriot and Holland were very helpful in detailing what we mean by the term “change.” In 2008 in the United States, Barak Obama went to the White House offering “Change we can believe in.” In 2015, Justin Trudeau became Prime Minister offering “Real Change.” Change is one of those ‘amoeba words’ as Ivan Illich might say, that means different things to different audiences. For social analysis to be useful, we need to know what we mean by change and the many nuances to the way it is used. A revisiting of this section in the light of current experience and more recent scholarship would be very helpful.

Much like the previous Henriot and Holland volume, this book will properly assume a respected place in the libraries of many religious people and in the “tool kits” of many activists. Maria Cimperman has done a great service to those working for justice and peace. Her volume will be important too in renewing more serious attention to the field of ethics. It is never easy to write the sequel in a manner that exceeds the original. But it a most thoughtful and sensitive way Maria Cimperman has done just that and in the process helped all of us who seek to make the world a better place.

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